



POLICY BRIEF:

Humanitarian Action for Those in Greatest Need

The COVID-19 pandemic has heavily impacted an already under-resourced global humanitarian sector and simultaneously intensified humanitarian needs globally, making emergencies even more complex. It is more important than ever for Australia to take a leading role in anticipatory action and risk reduction, to address the root causes of protracted crises and displacement, and contribute our fair share to increasing humanitarian needs across the globe.

KEY POINTS

- Between 2015 and 2021 a further 235.4 million people globally became in need of humanitarian assistance – with a worrying increase of 40 per cent in the past 12 months alone.¹
- For Australia to maintain its reputation as an effective and reputable humanitarian donor, it must adhere to its commitments under critical international agreements, especially those relating to locally led humanitarian responses.
- In 2021, highest humanitarian needs remain in the Middle East and Africa. The 2017 White Paper highlights the importance of these regions to Australia's conflict prevention and humanitarian objectives.² Australia's humanitarian and development funding do not currently reflect this.
- COVID-19 has highlighted pre-existing vulnerabilities. It has exacerbated conflicts, inequality, gender-based violence, climate change-related disasters, societal divisions and poverty.
- Globally, more than 90 per cent of humanitarian funding is allocated to response, with less than 1% to anticipation, 3.8% to preparedness, and 5.5% to recovery and reconstruction despite being more cost-effective.³ Anticipatory action requires humanitarian financing to be more flexible, coordinated and predictable.

RECOMMENDATIONS

ALLEVIATING HUMANITARIAN SUFFERING BASED ON NEED

1. Commit Australia's fair share of humanitarian financing by doubling the 2017 White Paper's commitment to provide \$500m p.a. in global humanitarian funding to at least \$1 billion p.a. from 2022-23.⁴ This increase must come from increasing Official Development Assistance and should fund local actors and civil society to be 'as local as possible, as international as necessary'.⁵
2. Ensure Australia's policies, funding decisions, program activities and organisational structures continue to uphold and strengthen the internationally recognised humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence.
3. Humanitarian decisions, especially those related to funding allocations, must be guided first and foremost by humanitarian need and protection.
4. The Australian Government must work collaboratively with humanitarian agencies to improve capacity to operate in insecure environments by ensuring that relevant legislation, regulations, policies and procedures enable delivery of humanitarian assistance in insecure environments.

RECOMMENDATIONS CONTINUED

ADDRESSING THE ROOT CAUSES OF CONFLICT AND DISPLACEMENT

5. Increase Australia's investment in funding for early/anticipatory action, based on credible forecasts, which can significantly reduce the impacts of disasters and crises, including a \$150 million dollar package to address global food insecurity.
6. Ensure investment under the Partnerships for Recovery strategy, and its successor, considers and responds to disaster and climate change risks and impacts, and where appropriate, support opportunities for lower emission, climate resilient and disaster risk-informed development. Do so ahead of the Asia Pacific Ministerial Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction being hosted in Australia in 2022 and the mid-term review of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction in 2023.
7. Develop a clear long-term strategy to resolve global displacement crises, including linking with climate change and disaster risk reduction initiatives in the Pacific to support climate change refugees.
8. Advocate for, and contribute to, implementation of the recommendations of the UN High Level Panel on Internal Displacement, including support for the proposed new UN Fund on Internal Displacement.
9. Appoint an Ambassador for Humanitarian Affairs, focused on:
 - a. reducing displacement drivers, including conflict and climate change;
 - b. overseeing Australia's humanitarian engagement to identify opportunities for improvement, efficiencies and learning;
 - c. strengthening assistance and protection; and
 - d. finding durable solutions for refugees and IDPs.

EFFECTIVE AND INCLUSIVE HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE

10. Design multi-year funding packages in the context of existing and planned development investments to ensure continuity and harmony across the development and humanitarian nexus, in line with our commitments under the Grand Bargain. This will maximise efficiency, protect gains, and address underlying causes of conflict and disaster, including climate change and food insecurity.
11. Ensure that investment in military capabilities is complemented with investment in civil society's capability to respond to disasters and crises. Highly securitised disaster response excludes the voice of civil society, which is best placed to ensure inclusive and effective responses. This is especially important in countries where state and military institutions are not responsive to the needs of minority groups and vulnerable populations.
12. Commit to the Grand Bargain target of providing at least 25 per cent of humanitarian funding to local and national responders, as directly as possible.
13. Work to balance commitments to funding local and national actors, with risk management, due diligence and safeguarding requirements.
14. Deliver cash-based humanitarian assistance which links or aligns with local and national mechanisms such as social protection systems.
15. Ensure adequate funding for the 'accompaniment' role that Australian humanitarian agencies play in assisting local organisations to engage with the humanitarian sector and comply with donor reporting and requirements.
16. Ensure that funding mechanisms are structured to enable and encourage local organisations, in particular women and girls, and organisations of people with disabilities, to access and receive international humanitarian funding without having to compete with international actors.
17. Place the protection of women and girls, people with disabilities, and ethnic and religious minorities at the heart of humanitarian action.

WHY EXTEND AND IMPROVE HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE?

Over one billion people, more than ever, need humanitarian assistance, and the circumstances of their emergencies are growing increasingly complex and interlinked. More people are also displaced than ever before, with the number of internally displaced people (IDPs) rising from 16 million in 2010 to a historic record of more than 40 million by 2020, while the refugee population doubled to 30 million.⁶ The spiralling number of people in need includes greater numbers of marginalised people and minority groups, who bear the greatest cost in humanitarian emergencies, including women and girls: six of the top 10 countries of greatest humanitarian concern for the International Rescue Committee are also on the Women Peace and Security Index's 10 countries where it is least safe to be female.⁷

COVID-19 has exacerbated the adversity faced by people living in the crisis of armed conflict, which today affects more countries than it has at any point in the past 30 years.⁸ In countries such as Afghanistan, Syria and Yemen, years of conflict have gutted health systems and eroded governments' capacity to respond to the emergency of COVID-19, further exacerbating the pandemic's tragic impact.⁹ At the same time, climate change is causing longer, more frequent and more intense extreme weather events, reducing access to natural resources, food and livelihoods, increasing the risk of forced displacement.

Australia has a proud history of supporting people affected by crises.

But as the global humanitarian landscape shifts, Australia must realign its strategy to ensure it continues to reach the people in greatest need.

It is critical that the Australian Government use all aid, political and diplomatic means possible to prevent, respond to, and address the root causes of these protracted crises. Addressing pre-existing societal vulnerabilities, including inequality, barriers to social and economic participation, and discrimination, decreases the loss and suffering people experience during crises.

Despite the growing scale and complexity of humanitarian emergencies, the support needed to address these crises is weakening. 2020 was the first year ever in which UN-led humanitarian appeals were funded at less than 50 per cent. The system is already stretched, and the persistent gap between need and funding demands all governments increase their support, to better respond to these pressing global challenges.¹⁰

As a wealthy, middle-power actor, Australia is well-positioned to take a principled, anticipatory and whole-of-government approach to humanitarian action.

Public support for Official Development Assistance has increased during the COVID-19 pandemic: acknowledgement that Australia's international cooperation to alleviate suffering is more important than ever.¹¹

We must make a concerted effort to turn policy rhetoric on protection and inclusion into tangible action for crisis-affected populations. Improving existing and planned funding and cross-cutting policies, especially through locally led responses and funding regional civil society, can lead to cost efficiencies and stronger strategic outcomes.

In supporting this higher ambition, the Australian Government must support departmental capabilities to deliver on a more ambitious humanitarian agenda. Critical to this is the need for greater transparency and accountability on where humanitarian and development funding is going, the future of the Humanitarian Strategy, and continued open, frank dialogue with humanitarian partners on the challenges, changes and opportunities facing the international humanitarian sector. This could be achieved with the appointment of a Ambassador for Humanitarian Affairs in DFAT, who would oversee Australia's humanitarian engagement to identify opportunities for improvement, efficiencies and learning and address underlying drivers of humanitarian need such as displacement, conflict and climate change. This role could be complemented by high-level envoys who oversee the Australian Government's engagement and response to priority crises.

A GLOBAL FOCUS: ALLEVIATING SUFFERING WHEREVER IT IS FOUND, IN LINE WITH HUMANITARIAN PRINCIPLES

In 2021, the highest humanitarian needs remain in the Middle East and Africa. Driven by the mandate to alleviate suffering and provide assistance, humanitarian organisations are increasingly operating in fragile and conflict-affected environments in these regions. The Australian Government's decision to prioritise development assistance to the Indo-Pacific region must not limit the provision of flexible and predictable humanitarian assistance globally, especially to countries where need is most acute or under-funded. This includes continuing and increasing funding for humanitarian assistance and protection in insecure, complex and protracted crises such as the situations in Afghanistan, Myanmar and Palestine.

Security risks have increased for organisations working in countries experiencing conflict. In the face of an evolving risk environment, humanitarian organisations balance their humanitarian mandate to relieve suffering wherever it is found with strategies to mitigate and reduce the risk of harm to their staff, their organisation, and the populations they seek to serve. Yet the increased reluctance of the Australian Government to fund Australian humanitarian agencies to work in insecure environments, despite the robust risk management practices humanitarian agencies have built in partnership with the Australian Government, is limiting their ability to respond to humanitarian needs.

Continuing to provide humanitarian and development assistance in insecure environments fulfills Australia's obligation to provide humanitarian assistance that adheres to the principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence. It also promotes stability and security and will mitigate the risk of terrorism and growing global displacement crises, which is fundamental to Australia's national security.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Commit Australia's fair share of humanitarian financing by doubling the 2017 White Paper's commitment to provide \$500m p.a. in global humanitarian funding to at least \$1 billion p.a. from 2022-23.¹² This increase must come from increasing Official Development Assistance and should fund local actors and civil society to be 'as local as possible, as international as necessary'.¹³
2. Ensure Australia's policies, funding decisions, program activities and organisational structures continue to uphold and strengthen the internationally recognised humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence.
3. Humanitarian decisions, especially those related to funding allocations, must be guided first and foremost by humanitarian need and protection.
4. The Australian Government must work collaboratively with humanitarian agencies to improve capacity to operate in insecure environments by ensuring that relevant legislation, regulations, policies and procedures:
 - a. are in line with international humanitarian law, which states that impartial humanitarian actors have the right to offer their services to parties to conflict;
 - b. include a humanitarian safeguard and a provision for consultation with civil society prior to establishing autonomous sanctions, including under the recently passed *Autonomous Sanctions Amendment (Magnitsky-style and Other Thematic Sanctions) Act 2021* and associated regulations, to avoid unintended consequences;
 - c. are informed by robust risks and rewards analyses; and
 - d. support greater local and national participation in and leadership of humanitarian action, including with diverse groups including actors representing women and people with disabilities

ADDRESSING ROOT CAUSES OF CONFLICT AND DISPLACEMENT

Humanitarian need has never been greater, and conflict and displacement continue to be its key drivers. Hunger and malnutrition have also reached critical levels.¹⁴ Thus, humanitarian action must be strategic, with a view to avoiding further need for assistance. It should anticipate and prevent suffering. In a new world order defined by climate change and the economic and social fallout of COVID-19, it is time to shift to anticipatory action and risk reduction, and ensure the linking of development and humanitarian investments, before disaster strikes.

At least half of all humanitarian crises are foreseeable and more than 20 per cent are highly predictable. But less than one per cent of humanitarian funding goes to anticipatory action.¹⁵

COST SAVINGS OFFERED BY EARLY ACTION

According to a cost analysis conducted by the Central Emergency Response Fund, an anticipatory response to flooding in Bangladesh in 2020 cost \$10 less for each person supported than the more reactive response to similar flooding in 2017. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations claims that for every dollar invested in anticipatory action, affected households saw returns of up to nine times as much in avoided losses and added benefits. For its part, the World Food Programme has used anticipatory approaches to bring in food aid before supply chains become disrupted by a crisis, at times making roads unusable and the transport of supplies much more complicated. "The cost is so much more after the fact," said its executive director, David Beasley.¹⁶

More people have now been displaced by conflict and violence than at any other time in human history. This is a human catastrophe, enveloping the lives of 84 million people, more than 1 per cent of the world's population. Another 30 million were displaced by disasters in 2021: a figure set to rise sharply due to climate-induced disasters which have dramatically increased in frequency, scale and intensity.

Without sustained diplomacy to prevent displacement or broker solutions, most displaced people will spend a decade or more in remote refugee and IDP camps, exposed to violence, coercion and abuse, and denied their basic rights. Encamped refugees will continue to be denied permission to move, work, or access government services, creating further aid dependence, eroding their self-esteem and the generosity of host states, while preventing recovery and self-reliance. Without solutions, refugees trying to survive in urban slums will continue to face discrimination, abuse, detention

and deportation, and have little or no access to justice or protection as non-citizens. Greater effort is required to reduce displacement drivers, reduce harm during displacement, find solutions, and address smaller displacement crises; all of which have a strong cost-benefit value.

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6. Ensure investment under the Partnerships for Recovery strategy, and its successor, considers and responds to disaster and climate change risks and impacts, and where appropriate, support opportunities for lower emission, climate resilient and disaster risk-informed development. Do so ahead of the Asia Pacific Ministerial Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction being hosted in Australia in 2022 and the mid-term review of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction in 2023.
7. Develop a clear long-term strategy to resolve global displacement crises, including linking with climate change and disaster risk reduction initiatives in the Pacific to support climate change refugees.
8. Advocate for, and contribute to, implementation of the recommendations of the UN High Level Panel on Internal Displacement, including support for the proposed new UN Fund on Internal Displacement.
9. Appoint an Ambassador for Humanitarian Affairs, focused on:
 - a. reducing displacement drivers, including conflict and climate change;
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EFFECTIVE AND INCLUSIVE HUMANITARIAN ACTION

Increasingly complex and protracted crises need multi-year, flexible and inclusive responses. These responses should be linked with Australia's development strategy and delivered in an inclusive, locally led way.

One way of improving the quality and efficacy of Australia's humanitarian assistance is to make it more locally led. The purpose of localisation is to ensure that existing power imbalances within the humanitarian system are not compounded and perpetuated at times of crisis or disaster. Communities affected by conflict and disaster should be the ones to direct how assistance is used for their own recovery. Localisation has both moral value and practical benefits, which include early response and access, cost effectiveness, and an increased willingness to accept humanitarian aid. It has been widely shown that humanitarian responses are most effective when they are based on genuine, longstanding partnerships and are designed and led by local actors.¹⁷ For localisation to move from rhetoric to reality, a major reallocation of power and resources to national and local actors must occur. However, localisation isn't automatically inclusive, and can miss minority and underrepresented actors. Localisation must be strategic and intentionally inclusive.

Recovery from COVID-19 can prevent future harm from disasters if social and economic recovery investment also reduces disaster risk. The current approach to financing disaster risk reduction is not keeping pace with the exponential rise of disaster risk, undermining progress towards achieving the sustainable development goals. Yet stronger financing to address disaster risk has immense potential. Incorporating risk management more deeply into investment and business decisions, and designing post-COVID-19 stimulus packages to address key disaster risk drivers, can prevent future harm and catalyse greener economic growth.

A growing body of evidence demonstrates the broad benefits of multi-year approaches to protracted or recurrent crises. These programs build community resilience to protracted or recurrent crises, and when delivered with flexible funding, are highly efficient and effective. The efficiency gains of multi-year approaches also ensure that partners, both national and international, can maintain their responsive capacity and quickly scale up to deliver life-saving assistance in the event of a conflict spike, or recurrent drought.

MULTI-YEAR FUNDING FOR AFGHAN RESILIENCE

In contrast to standard short-term (6-12 month) humanitarian program funding, the multi-year approach of the Afghanistan Resilience project (four years with a two-year extension) enabled greater focus on resilience and food security initiatives. These include supporting resilience-building activities, such as access to irrigation water, markets and environmental protections that cannot be facilitated in short-term programs. Resilience is, by definition, a long-term process. Supporting resilience strategies prior to any shock occurring is essential for supporting communities to positively cope with that shock.¹⁸

The Australian Government has previously established multi-year funding agreements, including substantial packages of assistance for Syria, Iraq, and a combined package for Afghanistan and Pakistan. Since these packages, the Australian Government has failed on its Grand Bargain commitment to maintain five multi-year agreements by 2017, with its only current multi-year funding package delivered in Myanmar and Bangladesh. In light of the ever-growing pressure on the international humanitarian system, we urge the Australian Government to scale up Australia's investment in multi-year humanitarian programs including in countries such as Ethiopia and Afghanistan and commit to extend assistance in Myanmar in light of recent escalation in humanitarian needs.

The form these funding agreements take can also deliver more effective and efficient humanitarian support. A greater focus on using cash in humanitarian assistance delivers greater choice and empowerment to affected people, and strengthens local markets, but remains largely underutilised. Cash has the greatest impact when delivered as a single multi-sector transfer, rather than being broken into components for shelter, household good, etc, and is complemented by in-kind assistance, specialised interventions, specific technical support, and vouchers.

To be most effective, Australia's humanitarian support must champion the rights of minority and marginalised groups. Humanitarian crises disproportionately affect women and girls, people with disabilities, and marginalised groups, including those experiencing discrimination based on age, gender, sexual orientation, religion, or ethnicity. It is estimated that 70 per cent of all women in humanitarian contexts experience gender-based violence, compared with 35 per cent globally.¹⁹ Australia must continue to champion protection, gender and inclusion in its humanitarian programming, and advocate for the rights and just treatment of minorities.

The Partnerships for Recovery strategy states that existing investments in health, education, social protection and economic development will be re-oriented to support partner governments to deliver critical services. Yet this strategy, which replaced the Humanitarian Strategy and pivots the priorities of Australia's humanitarian funding, is worryingly silent on how we might enable the protection of minority groups' rights in humanitarian emergencies. Stronger, more effective humanitarian funding must centre and respond to the needs of the most vulnerable.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

10. Design multi-year funding packages in the context of existing and planned development investments to ensure continuity and harmony across the development and humanitarian nexus, in line with our commitments under the Grand Bargain. This will maximise efficiency, protect gains, and address underlying causes of conflict and disaster, including climate change and food insecurity.
11. Ensure that investment in military capabilities is complemented with investment in civil society's capability to respond to disasters and crises. Highly securitised disaster response excludes the voice of civil society, which is best placed to ensure inclusive and effective responses. This is especially important in countries where state and military institutions are not responsive to the needs of minority groups and vulnerable populations.
12. Commit to the Grand Bargain target of providing at least 25 per cent of humanitarian funding to local and national responders, as directly as possible.
13. Work to balance commitments to funding local and national actors, with risk management, due diligence and safeguarding requirements, including through:
 - Resourcing local and national actors to better understand and meet these requirements, including through the provision of funding for core and organisational capacity strengthening costs; and
 - Reducing the duplication of compliance requirements to increase efficiencies for local actors and reduce organisational and administrative costs.
14. Deliver cash-based humanitarian assistance which links or aligns with local and national mechanisms such as social protection systems.
15. Ensure adequate funding for the 'accompaniment' role that Australian humanitarian agencies play in assisting local organisations to engage with the humanitarian sector and comply with donor reporting and requirements.
16. Ensure that funding mechanisms are structured to enable and encourage local organisations, in particular women and girls, and organisations of people with disabilities, to access and receive international humanitarian funding without having to compete with international actors.
17. Place the protection of women and girls, people with disabilities, and ethnic and religious minorities at the heart of humanitarian action. Protection should centre on human rights, including addressing restrictions on human rights defenders, displaced people's organisations, and ensuring the protection of civil society where they have been displaced and are outside their own country, not just livelihoods and protection from poverty.

ENDNOTES

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- 3 Financial Flows Mapping, <https://start-network.app.box.com/s/cqzxnvgjsun7covshe28z07bbympgke>
- 4 Australia's fair share of humanitarian funding is at least A\$1.05 billion million in 2022. This figure is calculated by Oxfam and updated annually as a percentage of Australia's economy relative to all High and Upper Middle-Income countries.
- 5 As local as possible, as international as necessary: understanding capacity and complementarity in humanitarian action, <https://odi.org/en/publications/as-local-as-possible-as-international-as-necessary-understanding-capacity-and-complementarity-in-humanitarian-action/>
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 UN/World Bank, Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict, 2018, p. xvii, available at: <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/28337>.
- 9 "Alert 2021! Report on conflicts, human rights and peacebuilding" <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/alert-2021-report-conflicts-human-rights-and-peacebuilding>
- 10 The push to anticipate crises gains steam, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/the-wrap/2021/9/13/the-push-to-anticipate-crises-gains-steam>
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